

From the book "A Critique of Activity Theory"

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## Collaborative Projects

To resolve the impasse at which Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) has arrived, I propose a new unit of activity to represent the whole of which actions are a part. So in Leontyev's three levels of activity, with *operations* and (joint artifact-mediated) *actions*, we are to introduce a new unit for 'an activity'. To introduce this proposal we must first of all explain the concepts of 'project' and 'collaboration'.

For 'project', the Oxford English Dictionary has:

*"A planned or proposed undertaking; a scheme, a proposal; a purpose, an objective; a collaborative enterprise, ... planned to achieve a particular aim. An exercise in which students study a topic, either independently or in collaboration, over an extended period"* (OED Online).

This is consistent with what is meant here, but we need further explanation to determine a dialectical conception which is suitable for the pivotal role it needs to play in the development of CHAT.

For collaboration, the Oxford English Dictionary has simply: "United labour, co-operation; *esp.* in literary, artistic, or scientific work" (OED Online). This is not quite sufficient, because we shall make a distinction between collaboration and cooperation and the concept needs more explanation.

These two concepts are closely connected with one another; projects are essentially collaborative<sup>1</sup> and collaboration is possible only with some project. Consequently, from time to time we may refer to collaboration and projects separately, whilst retaining the understanding that the two are essentially inseparable. Likewise actions are always artifact-mediated and are essentially other-related, but we may from time

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<sup>1</sup> Solo projects are conceivable as a limiting case, but such efforts invariably turn out to be part of larger projects involving others, or at the very least look to others for appreciation or support.

to time refer to actions without the qualifications that actions are essentially joint and mediated by artifacts.

A project is an on-going, interconnected aggregate of actions<sup>2</sup>, and contains nothing that is not contained in the constitutive actions, but is at the same time something more than the sum of its actions. A project is directed to some aim, but at the same time, a project is also not equated with its aim; on the contrary, the aim is implicit in the actions of which it is composed alone, and has no other existence; the participants may be quite mistaken in what they take to be the ultimate effect of the project. What this means is that the project has a concept, but every participant may have a different take on that concept (a personal meaning). For example, Christianity. Doubtless every Christian has a different concept of Christianity, incorporating different aspects of its history and culture. But these are not simply individual fragments, but all are interconnected in the social life of Christians. The concept 'Christianity' has many nuances; it is a concrete concept with a meaning which has accrued connotations and contradictions over the centuries. And Christianity is *nothing other* than this project. This is a very complex and concrete example. Alternatively, the project may be a planned fundraising party, with a finite time-scale and few accrued nuances of meaning. Nonetheless, the group collaborating in organizing the fundraiser will have a range of differing ideas about the event, and will argue and struggle over all the steps of preparation and staging until the event becomes an actuality, despite all the disagreements along the way. Nonetheless despite the fact that a project is made up of a myriad of actions there is a concept of the project, a living concept. There will nonetheless be differences and contradictions contained within the concept, but these contradictions and differences are coherent and belong to the concept. It is a matter of judgment how adequate a particular action may be and there are objective criteria.

All those things which may be more usually thought of as attributes of a person – their nationality, their profession, their hobbies – insofar as they contribute to the person's identity are to be taken here as *projects* in which the person is a participant.

A project is not only actions but artifacts. These artifacts are implied in the notion of action and all the artifacts mediating the actions of which the project is composed are understood as subsumed in the project as well. Among the artifacts included in a project are the words naming it, the language(s) used and any symbols representing it, and all the tools, land, buildings, documents and so on supporting the projects. So there are a mass of material artifacts entailed in any project, but they are not just a mass of unorganized material, but on the contrary are all coherently deployed in a constellation determined and grasped in the concept of the project.

CHAT is a project, and I am a participant in this project and my psychological functioning is in great part determined by this project because of my participation in it.

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<sup>2</sup> Actions are always mediated by artifacts, and those artifacts which mediate actions which are part of the project are taken to be part of the project as well.

When I say that CHAT is a project, that includes all the people involved, everything they have written and the myriad of actions other than writing which have an impact on the furtherance of CHAT, such as travel, conversations, donations, research, etc. So for example, the psychological impact on me of reactions to this book would depend on the reception of those reactions within CHAT.

When we survey the open-ended totality of actions which make up the 'context' of an action, then we will have to interrogate the relation between two actions. The relevant issue for psychology is: *of what common project are the actions a part* (there may be more than one) and how do the actions relate to joint furtherance of the project. This is not an open-ended totality. There are definite normative criteria against which the relevance of an action or artifact or individual person can be determined – the project and its concept.

'Project' differs from 'object-oriented activity' because collaboration in a project is essentially *active*, whilst object-oriented activity is essentially *passive*, a response to the stimuli given by the object, a species of reflex. In "Theses on Feuerbach," Marx made a great deal of the idea of activity as *active* and not passive. For example, when he says: "The materialist doctrine that men are products of circumstances and upbringing, and that, therefore, changed men are products of changed circumstances and changed upbringing, forgets that it is men who change circumstances ..." this is precisely his point: human beings are active subjects, they *change* the circumstances of their lives, they do not just passively respond to their environment. So 'project' does not give us an objectivist, functional/structural vision of the fabric of society, but on the contrary, a living, active view of society as a cloth which is constantly being stitched and embroidered by human activity, a myriad of intersecting and overlapping projects, a billion personal *Bildungsromans*.

Like participation in a project, collaboration encompasses both cooperation and conflict<sup>3</sup>, and is essentially both. The collaborators have a shared interest in the outcome of the project, but they may disagree not only on the best means of getting there and fight over the means to be used, but they may also fundamentally disagree over the nature of the end. In fact, disputes over means usually resolve, to some degree, into disputes over ends. A project may break down and the collaborators may cease collaborating and go their separate ways. But insofar as they remain collaborators, then they share the outcome, and in that sense will come to a practical agreement in the end; the end resolves the conflict. Concretely, the role of conflict in projects can only be resolved by empirical investigation.

So when we say 'joint activity' then the claim here is that we put instead 'collaboration'. 'Joint' carries no particular normative content. Collaboration on the other hand is rich in content, both normative and descriptive. Normatively,

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<sup>3</sup> The place of conflict in collaborative projects is a complex issue. Clearly there is conflict and conflict; conflict can be destructive as well constructive; sometimes people's lives have led them to such a degree of agreement that no conflict is needed. But the point is that conflict is *in principle* part of collaboration.

collaborators consult with one another and reach consensus on actions. Of course, this is not always the case; sometimes consultation is not necessary, sometimes agreement is not necessary, sometimes what is needed is just clarity on what needs to be discussed and what can be left well alone. Again, the concrete role of discussion and consensus in collaboration can only be resolved by investigation, but *normatively*, everything is up for discussion and everything should be agreed. Collaboration is a process of convergence both cognitively and in action. In the normative case, power relations are not posed; the collaborators do everything by consensus and without strategic action, because they have, in principle, a common will. But what is the case is often far from what is normative, and this disjunction between the actual and the normative is always psychologically significant.

There are a number of different relations between two people when mediated by a project in which they are collaborators, and these relations have profound ethical and psychological significance. Projects mediate relations between people. Although in CHAT it is common to talk about artifacts mediating relations between people, but artifacts cannot *do* anything; an artifact can be used in a common project, but it is only the common project which mediates.

There are a number of modes of collaboration which function in the theory as *limit cases* of collaboration.

In families and in bureaucratic organizations, collaboration may take the form of (1) management or (2) division of labor.

(1) *Management*, or hierarchical cooperation: one subject takes full ethical and cognitive responsibility for the project – ‘owns’ the project – and directs the actions of the others who do not question orders. This is the master-servant relation taken by Hegel as the first form of modern society, and it remains the norm inside capitalist and public service enterprises. The entire organization acts as the corporate subject in a project, with actions directed according to some system of line management. As Agnes Heller (1986) says: “equality means treating equals equally and unequals unequally.” The person at the top of the hierarchy is not an equal to a subordinate, and they are not treated equally, and this inequality is not taken to be unfair. In certain circumstances it is entirely rational to hand authority to just one party, and the very act of passing the helm to someone else and following their directions is a positive act of collaboration. Clearly this relationship has profound psychological consequences.

The methodology used here is that we take meritocratic and traditional hierarchy as a *mode of collaboration*, in particular as a *limiting case* in which the initiative has gone entirely to one pole of the relationship. It is not that we want to study only projects which are collaborative, but rather that we want to study *all* projects through the lens of collaboration. So, working together but *not* according to a particular norm of collaboration, is a limiting case of collaboration. The concept of ‘collaboration’

provides us with a compass for the exploration of relationships with the concept of 'project' acting as the pole of attraction.

(2) *Division of labor* is ubiquitous in modern society, representing the collaboration of all the operatives within a capitalist or public service enterprise and all the productive workers in an economy. But division of labor also operates in some traditional relationships, for example, with women attending to women's business and the men attending to men's business.

Division of labor includes (3) *Cooperation*, where a project begins by dividing up the activity so that individuals or subgroups may separately carry out actions under their own initiative towards a shared objective. In (2) and (3), relations may be egalitarian and consensual, but there is no mutual critique. As soon as participants make suggestions on each others' work, for example, then that is collaboration in the normative sense.

(4) *Exchange of commodities* is a variety of collaboration in which the parties have separate, even mutually hostile projects, but are willing to exchange money or goods in order to instrumentalize the other parties for their own project. Under this heading, the notion of (5) 'external rewards' (MacIntyre 1988) is relevant. For example, an Olympic athlete is formally participating in a project to raise the level of athletic performance in their sport, perfecting control over their own mind and body, but the prevalence of performance-enhancing drugs suggests that many competitors are in it for fame and glory, not art for art's sake. To those who participate in good faith, the sport gives internal rewards of a deeper kind. The days when people took up political office for the good of the country rather than money, power and fame seem to have gone. Also, in many projects, such as scientific or artistic projects, the question of *attribution* becomes a powerful factor in the psychology of participants. One person may do all the work, while another receives attribution and along with attribution the kudos which accompanies successful projects.

There are a myriad of such relations of 'jointness'. For example, when a service provider does some service for a customer, the customer is quite often deeply involved in specifying and controlling the project: collaboration is subsumed under exchange. This is especially the case with health services and building projects, for example. And on the other hand, we can have conflict over an outcome where people are collaborators despite themselves. For example, rivals in a competition succeed in improving the standard of achievement by trying to prevent each other from winning.

We will deal with these issues in greater depth below. The point is that when we refer to 'joint' activity, we have to have a normative concept of what corresponds to 'jointness' and be able to draw on science with respect to deviations from the norms of collaboration. It is the fact that there are norms of collaboration that prevents 'collaboration' from indicating an open-ended totality. It by no means suggests that

relationships which differ from the norm of collaboration are ipso facto wrong or deficient on that account.

By taking *collaborative project* as a unit of analysis for activity (along with operation and action), we take normative collaboration, to be the norm against which actual relations are measured. We take as the norm that collaborators participate for the internal rewards, that is, the shared aim of the project and desist from strategic action and free-riding. But we do not *presume* that there is no conflict or free-riding. On occasion there is no other means of furthering a project than to mobilize some others by offering external rewards, and very often free-loaders contribute despite themselves. Conflict is normal in project collaboration; so is division of labor, but neither are mandated.

So we see that the notion of 'jointness' covers a wide range of psychologically significant differences in the nature of collaboration. But we have a norm, and norms relevant to specific situations, and psychological problems need to be informed by specific science concerned with these different modes of collaboration.

One of the problems with the notion of 'an activity' is that in Leontyev's concept, the identity of the activity, according to a supposed societal need, was ill-defined. In Cole's concept, 'the activity' is the essentially unbounded context. This is not the case with 'collaborative project'. A person could be engaged in innumerable projects and the projects could be relatively ill-defined. But in principle, a project is well-defined, bounded and finite. Instead of thinking of a person as a hook for so many attributes, think of all the projects in which the person is engaged. What you have then is so many threads into the social context in relation to which everything the social environment can be objectively assessed in terms of their relationship to the project. It makes sense then to take each relevant such project as a unit for psychological analysis.

Let us recall the three characteristics we determined for a unit of analysis: (1) It is the conception of a singular, indivisible thing; (2) It exhibits the essential properties of a class of more developed phenomena; (3) It is itself an existent phenomenon.

Collaborative project satisfies these criteria. Projects may be vast enterprises, like a nation-state. Projects may be very small or very large. One could argue that a 'joint mediated action' is the archetypal project, and on this basis that 'purposeful joint mediated action' should be the unit. We do retain 'joint artifact-mediated action' as a unit, but recognizing that actions have motivational sources which implicate the larger social context, we propose 'project' as a unit, with 'joint artifact-mediated action' as both a limiting case and an underlying level of activity.<sup>4</sup> Projects outlive actions, and are normally on-going; people join and leave a project, and this is a sense in which a project is essentially different from its constituent actions. Projects also nest one within another, so that a large project like a nation-state is the sum of millions of

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<sup>4</sup> 'Operation' is also a joint mediated action, but one which has been internalized by a person, so in a sense 'joint artefact-mediated action' is the one unit, extended inwards to operations and outwards to projects.

personal projects. All that is required is that someone works with at least one other towards an end.

And a project is by no means abstract or imaginary. It is a finite existent, observable entity. Actions are purposive, and when we interrogate an action, we will always ultimately disclose that there is a project which is providing the motivation. It was Leontyev's original aim to disclose the teleological or motivating forces underlying the actions of an individual, which he rightly saw as having social roots and branches. The notion of 'project' serves this need, and it is not necessary to equivocate about a person being 'aware' of the object of the activity. For example, if a weaver is working for a capitalist, he is lending his efforts to another person's project in order to further his own project; that is the relation. Perhaps he genuinely wants to see his boss grow richer, and perhaps the project also allows him to further perfect the art of weaving? All these problems are entailed in the relationship between collaborators in a project. Who owns the project? Who is committed to the internal rewards of the project, and who is pursuing only external rewards?

Social life at first sight appears an incoherent mass of actions. How do we stitch this incoherent mass of actions together into a coherent picture? How do we unravel the tangled mass of interconnections? Leontyev said, in effect: start with the needs of the society for its reproduction and work back, fitting all the actions into the object that motivate them. But starting with an abstract and hypothetical set of societal needs and working back to the concrete and given reality is problematic. Since the object of the enquiry is to shed light on people's motivation, we must start with a concept of people's motivation. We should start with the understanding that human beings pursue projects, and in and through the pursuit of these projects they form social bonds. It is true that in the end, the needs of the society to reproduce itself must be met. But this is by no means absolute. People *change* circumstances. But people also draw their aims and aspirations, their identity and understanding of the world around them. But it is only by their *active* participation in the world, by joining projects, that they gain an identity for themselves and a place in social life. If we want to understand people, then we have to begin with the real individuals, their activity and the material conditions under which they live. The notion of 'project' makes this possible.

This means that activity remains the substance of social life for Activity Theory, but we now have a *unit* of social life, the project. A project is activity, it is not anything different from activity; it is made up of actions; it is *an* activity. But we have given a coherent meaning to 'an activity'. A project is not an objectivist conception, imposed on society from outside, but arises from and is driven by and therefore subject to immanent critique.

To take an example, when Luria and his colleagues visited Uzbekistan and conducted psychological tests, their project was scientific research. Scientific research is a project which was quite foreign to the Uzbek peasants. This is the fundamental reason why the actions of Luria and his colleagues were misconstrued by the Uzbeks and the responses

of the Uzbeks were misconstrued by the researchers. Cole was finally successful in creating an environment for research into learning by creating a project – Fifth Dimension – in which his own project as well as that of the kids, their parents, funding bodies and the university could integrate into their own project as collaborators, even if negotiations were not uniformly successful. Cole cut through a billion factors which could be counted as part of the context of learning and identified the problem as one of making a common project. How can we collaborate in the same project so that we can all achieve our ends?

In fact, more generally, collaboration is a means of conceiving of social bonds. If we say that this person and that person share a social bond, we might imagine joining the two persons together with glue. On the other hand, if we say they ‘worked together’, that is, that they are or have been collaborators in this or that project, in this or that mode of collaboration, then we get a fairly precise picture of the nature of the social bond in question. It is collaboration of some kind which forges social bonds.

This concept is true to the example of Vygotsky and Meshcheryakov, in believing that an individual can form an image of an entire world through their immediate interactions with those around them, without the help of the arbitrary conceptions of the totality entailed in structural/functional models of the world. We form an image of the world by concrete and personal involvement in the activity of the world, using the artifacts produced in the world and participating in projects great and small, which contribute to sustaining the social life of humanity.

The notion of project may not be the unit of choice for a study of world history or financial markets, but even in these contexts so remote from problems of psychology, ‘project’ does make sense. What we need is a concept of activity which can provide a way of conceiving of a person’s participation in the world insofar as it affects their psychological functioning. The notions of collaboration and project do that.

When Marx remarks that “Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past” (Marx 1979: 103), then the notion of project offers a viable way of building a social theory which is consistent with Marx’s dictum.

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## Collaborative Projects and Agency

At a time when people are more and more conscious of how their lives are determined by global events and processes utterly out of their reach, economic and social changes have led individuals to crave assurance that they are in control of their own lives and have a say in the affairs of their country. This contradiction has focused attention on the 'problem of individual agency', that is, what sense can be found in notions like being in control of one's own life or having a say in the world or having an effect on history. Is 'individual agency' in any sense a coherent concept?

Lévi-Strauss (1962) once said that "as one passes to histories of progressively greater 'power' ... the historian loses in information what he gains in comprehension," i.e., the greater the distance from which one looks at a society, the more one is ready to see individual agency as illusory, and describe social change in terms of quasi-natural processes for which structural-functional explanations seem more satisfactory than ascribing events and social changes to the agency of any individual. But when we are describing our own life-world, objectivist explanations are surely unsatisfactory.

Among the difficulties which confront us in trying to make sense of the idea of individual agency is (1) the conception which follows from the above contradiction, that we have on the one hand, individuals who make choices about their own actions, and on the other hand, societal structures obedient to social and historical processes which are as objective as the movements of the heavens. In this case, individual agency is like arranging the deck chairs on the Titanic. (2) Since both the form and the content of an individual's thinking is determined by social and cultural factors, giving the individual both their ends and their means of pursuing them, the individual is nothing more than a carrier of social and historical phenomena. Movies like "The Matrix" and "The Truman Show" express these anxieties.

Confronting the situation in his native Germany at the close of the eighteenth century, Hegel regretted that theorists had neglected the simple truth that "freedom is possible only when a people is legally united within a state" (1999: 220), and Hegel devoted much of his life to promoting the idea of the state as a manifestation of the freedom of its citizens, rather than as a limitation on that freedom. When a people suffering under a foreign power or in a condition of lawlessness such as we have in the rising number of failed states around the world today, join together to found their own sovereign state, then surely this is a simple demonstration of the form and content of agency, namely self-determination, recognition and sovereignty. Even though nation-states, like individuals, live in a world beyond their control, we don't question their sovereignty because they control their own internal affairs according to their own laws, and they participate as an equal in the affairs of the rest of the world.

But liberals were not the only people who disagreed with Hegel. Marx ridiculed the idea of working class people, who were excluded from political life, being able to see

the state as an expression of their own freedom. Although Marx was an enthusiastic supporter of the Paris Commune, he does not seem to have supported the idea of a 'workers state' on a wider scope than a single city, where there was a realistic opportunity for any citizen to directly and personally intervene in the life of the Commune. Marx reported approvingly the idea among members of the Commune for the cities of France to each form themselves into self-governing Communes led by the organized workers, break up the centralized state-machine and restore the unity of the nation with a constitution based on the Communes. These were merely speculations as the Commune got no further than the walls of Paris, but the point is that self-determination, whether individual or national, has to be mediated by some form of association, in which individuals have real participation; otherwise, self-determination is simply self-deception.

So, if we interpret 'agency' as self-determination in the same sense in which nation-states exercise self-determination, of being recognized as a subject in one's own right, being in control of your own mind and body and having an equal say in the world around you, then this is something which is meaningful and attainable for individuals. However, we cannot adopt a cheap solution which shrinks the world to the individual's immediate sphere of activity, because this does not deal with the fact that language, custom, law and ideology all have their origin in the wider sphere of activity, not to mention invading foreign armies, climate change and American cultural imperialism. Self-determination is meaningless if it does not include the capacity to critically respond to societal forces.

After 50 years of working towards a definition of the meaning of 'well-being', Amartya Sen (2002: 258) arrived at the notion of 'critical voice' as the only reliable measure and source of an individual's well-being. Measurement of someone's level of functioning was not enough to reflect someone's well-being because self-determination was essential to well-being and flourishing. Sen introduced the idea that having an equal voice in society as a more truthful notion of equality and well-being than one based on functioning. But reflecting on the fact that even educated Indian women in some parts of the country would participate in the abortion of female fetuses made it clear that having a voice was not enough, one had to have a critical voice. This meant that people needed both a voice in the affairs of their country and enough knowledge of life beyond their own immediate milieu to be able to critically appropriate their own culture, in order to be truly free and equal. Sen's opinion is especially significant in that he has travelled a long road from welfare economics and the causes of famine to reach these conclusions. But how can we interpret the notion of 'critical voice' and how can it be made open to scientific investigation? The notion of 'collaborative project' in the context of activity theory is very useful in making sense of self-determination as exercise of critical voice.

The notion which was described above as a 'lumpy' conception of subjectivity makes a relevant point of contrast here as well. At first sight, being a member of a group which

is represented in government may seem to qualify at least in part for having a critical voice. But in fact being part of a group tells us nothing of whether an individual has a say in the group or whether the group has any real say in the wider community, and with or without a say, whether the one expresses the self-consciousness of the other. Being a voter in a geographical electorate along with 80,000 others, confers no say in the affairs of the country whatsoever. One person's vote can never change the result and consequently confers no social power; the voter has no voice in deciding the issues to be discussed or how they are discussed, and secret ballots ensure that voting is strictly individual and not collaborative. Unless you are very wealthy, the only practical ways a private person can influence an elected government are via lobby groups and social movements. Only if a group is formed around some concept through which the individual can work, only, in other words, to the extent that the individual participates in a collaborative project can he or she have a voice in the wider community.

But how do we understand the qualification 'critical'? Surely to have a critical voice means participating in a project in which there is both cooperation and conflict amongst many voices in pursuit of the common aim. To be critical in respect to one's own culture and ideology, if it means anything at all, means to be challenged by views coming from outside your own culture and ideology, perhaps from other countries; an individual is never absolutely barred from access to a critical viewpoint, and through collaboration is able to attain a critical voice in relation to their situation. A 'project' in which no dissenting voices can be heard, is unlikely to produce critical positions. But in a genuinely collaborative project, which concretizes its concept of itself through mutual criticism, a critical voice may manifest itself.

So for self-determination, one needs to be a part of collaborative projects. A collaborative project is a social subject in fact. Collaborative projects mean communicatively mediated self-determination. Collaborative projects are the very manifestation and measure of the self-determination of their participants. The individual/society dichotomy can only be overcome by forms of activity which mediate between the wider culture in which laws are made, the literature of the world circulates and armies are raised and deployed, and the immediate day-to-day life of individual human beings. We can only conceive of such a bridge in terms of a concept, a concept for-itself. This is what a project is.

This is not to deny that it may be legitimate to talk of social structures in terms of quasi-natural laws. But if we are to find any sense in the notion of individual self-determination, then it can only be by means of individuals participating in projects which do have the capacity to change these structures. The feeling of helplessness in the face of geopolitical forces and structures is a direct outgrowth of the promotion of individualist ideology and the undermining of the conditions for active participation in social life. You don't need to raise an army or build a political party to change the way things are done; just be part of a project which introduces a new word or concept.

# Emancipatory science

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In subjecting a current of thought to immanent critique, the critic places themselves *within* that school of thought. This replicates the normal method by which a science develops. Writers rarely subject those who are morally or intellectually distant from themselves to serious criticism, or listen to criticism that comes from afar; critical dialogue is the very thing which constitutes an intellectual pursuit *as a project* and binds it together with common aims. Even when a current is shown to have arrived at an impasse, critique reveals a solution which answers to the problems addressed by the current...

One of the characteristics of Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) and its predecessors in German thought is the continuous attention given to scientific method and in particular what Vygotsky called the unit of analysis; under one name or another, all the writers considered here have pondered the problem and given their own view on it. This on-going dialogue over the central problem of method is one of the characteristics constituting CHAT as a project. Because of this practice, we are all able to communicate with one another, even whilst there have been sharp differences between us. That is the nature of a collaborative project.

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...the most powerful concept in Goethe's approach to science was the *Urphänomen*. The *Urphänomen* is an empirically given thing, the simplest possible unit of a complex phenomenon which still has all the essential properties of the whole. As such it functions as an empirically given explanatory principle for the complex whole. This remarkable idea functions as the key methodological principle for Hegel, Marx and Vygotsky. It is the way in which it is possible to see the whole in every part, and therefore the key means for understanding a complex process *as a whole*, rather than dismembering it in the manner of analytical science. But the idea of the *Urphänomen* is not on its own sufficient to be able to understand a process as a *Gestalt*.

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Hegel had taken an entire social formation – which he called a 'formation of consciousness' – as his object of study, a *Gestalt*. Every subject within a formation of consciousness was a unit of that whole, interconnected with every other subject; but Hegel conceived of the subject as a *concept*, not as an individual, and a concept has three moments: the individual, the universal and the particular. Hegel transformed Goethe's idea into philosophical terms. The *Urphänomen* had become an abstract concept, understood as part of an entire formation of consciousness. Though expressed in arcane logical terms in Hegel's exposition, what this essentially means is that a concept exists only through the particular activity of individuals with each other,

organized around universal representations of the concept (i.e., artifacts which are part of the general culture).

Hegel made mind/matter dichotomies and problems of epistemology *objects of critique*, and felt no need to have his own version of such systems. He saw that any society operated with a range of artifacts that were products of their own labor, and this same range of artifacts was represented in their knowledge, so there was not a lot to be gained by trying to draw some line between the 'thought-objects' created by labor and knowledge of these 'thought-objects' produced by activity with them. As the practical activity of a social formation changes, so the artifacts they produce, and people's knowledge of those artifacts change. In this way, the idea of *mediation* dispensed with the problem of dichotomy.

Each of the different sciences in Hegel's "Encyclopedia" begins with a simple concept, such as 'Being' or 'Reflection' or 'Right' and the science is developed by interrogating what is in that concept. This meant that the entire science is developed as a 'formation of consciousness' in which every concept is genetically interconnected with every other. Hegel thus provided a model for the development of any science, albeit on an absolutely idealist foundation.

What is emancipatory about this approach to science is that the content is grasped *as a whole*, consistent with an ethical approach to all human beings as subjects in their own right. Further, the science begins from one *Urphänomen* whose nature and origins can be easily grasped, and which implicitly contains everything. There is therefore no recourse to dogmatic claims about 'laws of nature' or 'the origins of man' and so on. "All mysteries which lead theory to mysticism find their rational solution in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice."

Marx's was the emancipatory science *par excellence*: the *raison d'être* for Marx's work was the liberation of humanity. This meant that his published work was very much directed towards a broad public where it would have an effect: "theory becomes a material force as soon as it has gripped the masses" (Marx 1975c: 182), so we generally have to turn to manuscripts which were not published in his lifetime to learn about his methodology. But he makes it clear in the original preface to "Capital" that he uses the idea of *Urphänomen* as the foundation of his critique of bourgeois society. He criticizes Hegel for believing that the development of a science was the "product of thought concentrating itself" whereas, he says, the method of rising from the abstract to the concrete "is by no means the process by which the concrete itself comes into being" and "the subject, society, must always be kept in mind as the presupposition" (1986a: 38). This meant that an idea arises as a form of activity before it "appears in the head ... as a product of a thinking head." This takes the idea of immanent critique a step further, for it is the activity of human beings, even as it develops in the business of daily life, which is creating the *real abstractions* which are later to be reflected in the head of the theorist.

In his appropriation of Hegel, Marx introduced the idea of 'activity' as a philosophical category, making the substances of his philosophy "the real individuals, their activity and the material conditions under which they live, both those which they find already existing and those produced by their activity" (1975i: 31) from which it was possible to appropriate Hegel's philosophy as a genuinely humanistic method of science. This allowed Marx to develop an approach which ruthlessly did away with all forms of metaphysics. "History does nothing," he said, pointing out that "It is man, real, living man who does all that" (1975f: 93). It was precisely this refusal of the use of abstractions at the fundamental level which allowed Marx to develop a unique approach to the understanding of social formations as *Gestalten*.

It should be noted that just because he took as his premises "the real individuals, their activity and the material conditions under which they live," this did *not* mean that he set off from individuals as the atomistic components of a society. On the contrary, in his analysis of bourgeois society, he set off from the empirically given archetypal relationship, the commodity, which characterized the whole of bourgeois society. Further, Marx correctly identified the commodity relationship as the most typical of bourgeois society, he did *not* claim this as a transhistorical truth or universal relationship.

### **Vygotsky**

Vygotsky's argument with Behaviorism had led him to the conclusion that conversation between the researcher and the subject had to be central to the research data. He further recognized that speech was the most highly developed mode of human activity, and he therefore concentrated attention on the relationship between speaking and thinking to gain the key insights for a science of consciousness. He expressed this in the aphorism that the word is a microcosm of consciousness. His study of child development led him to the conclusion that there was pre-intellectual speech and pre-lingual intelligence; at a certain point, the two trajectories intersect, and speech becomes intelligent and intelligence becomes verbal. Speech modifies thinking and behavior, as children use language at first expressively, then indicatively and communicatively, but then to issue commands to themselves and narrate their own actions. He summed up his study of thinking and speech with the claim that the meaningful word is the unit of analysis for this study. However, he did not claim that word meaning was a unit of analysis for all the phenomena of behavior and consciousness. Close study of his work led to the conclusion that Vygotsky took the 'joint artifact-mediated action' as the unit of analysis for the study of consciousness. This is important, because it marks Vygotsky off from, for example, recent philosophy which goes beyond the study of language-use as the microcosm of human life to claim that language is the sole determinant of human behavior. But this is not the case.

One important thing about Vygotsky's methodology is that his concern to focus scientific work on the simple and empirically given was not limited to the idea of *Urphänomen* or 'unit of analysis' but characterized his approach more broadly. It was

absolutely central to the work of Vygotsky and his colleagues that the individual human psyche was a moment of the whole social formation (*Gestalt*), and could not be made sense of except through the understanding of a person in the context of their social practice. Nonetheless, Vygotsky consistently refused to introduce into his scientific work abstractions to represent societal phenomena and generally avoided reliance on speculative narratives about the past to explain the way things are today. “Each person is to some degree a measure of the society, or rather class, to which he belongs, for the whole totality of social relationships is reflected in him” (Vygotsky 1997b:317). Rather, Vygotsky represented how societal products, such as language, ideology and institutions, enter the psyche, not as abstractions, but through interactions with other people (adults already part of the wider culture) mediated with the use of artifacts (which are drawn from the wider culture). He had a very concrete conception of action. Only those empirically given entities – behavior, other people and things – entered into his reasoning, not invisible ‘objective’ motives or other abstractions used to represent societal forms of activity. Just as a word was a microcosm of a culture, every artifact conveys hard information about the wider world and every individual is a microcosm of the entire society of which they are a part, a fact of significance not only for the researcher, but also for the growing child with whom the adult interacts.

### **Leontyev**

Later on, Vygotsky was subject to criticism by Leontyev for failing to represent the social sources of the motivation for people’s activity. Experimental scenarios in which people sort colored blocks hardly shed light on the motivation of people’s significant life activities.

In his unfinished studies of child development, Vygotsky made a definition of ‘social situation of development’ which gave us a clue to how Vygotsky would approach the more general problem of representing societal phenomena in the development of the individual’s psyche. Vygotsky captured a child’s social situation of development as a predicament, represented in a contradiction between the mode of satisfaction of a child’s needs on the one hand (including social expectations on the child at its stage of development) and the actual mode of perception and psychological functioning of the child. At a certain point, the specific mode by means of which their needs are met becomes an ‘offence’ and the child wants to escape from this mode of interaction in which it is trapped, but they are not yet able to function at the higher level which is needed to operate outside this mode of interaction: thus the predicament, and the predicament is the driving force for the child’s development and transformation of their mode of interaction with adults. Likewise, the formation of a *concept* of an action-in-context is required to represent the motivations animating a person in their activity in society. The situation cannot be represented *in abstracto*.

The key criticism that Leontyev made of Vygotsky’s psychology was that because of division of labor, the goal of a person’s action was not generally the same as the

motive of the social activity of which it is a part. So long as goals and motives were at odds with one another, analysis of their actions could not fully reveal their psychology. The same goes for the formation of concepts: that a set of blocks are all red-squares, hardly represents the full depth of word meaning in the spoken language, with its myriad of interconnections and shades of meaning. So Leontyev developed an activity-based representation of social life, a view which went a long way towards an activity reading of Hegel's Spirit. Artifacts are objectifications of human powers, which in turn mediate activity. Marx insisted that concepts were formed in social activity before they came to be reflected in someone's head and incorporated in theory. So it would seem that a theory which could grasp the creation of concepts in activity, rather than in the head, was a useful avenue to take.

With a three-level anatomy of activity – operations, actions and activities – Leontyev aimed to develop a notion of activity which had psychological, interpersonal and societal aspects to it. This looks like an interdisciplinary concept of activity. But Activity Theory never fulfilled this potential, and there are reasons for this failure.

...

So the problem remains. How can we represent the source of the motivation of human actions? How can we represent the objective existence of concepts in forms of activity, prior to their reflection in consciousness? How can we represent the social context of human action in such a way that the cognition of actions and artifacts can be theorized? The long-standing interest of philosophers and psychologists in child development is because personality and consciousness *comes into being* as a child grows into adulthood. A more modern form of this problem is cross-cultural phenomena: how can people understand each other across cultural boundaries, and thereby *gain* a concept of something? In Leontyev's system based on *objective societal needs*, it is impossible even to represent such a problem, let alone solve it. It was this problem which was the impulse for the particular contribution of Michael Cole which we need to mention.

### **Cole**

Mike Cole confronted the problem of context in his work 40 years ago, studying difficulties children had learning mathematics in school in Liberia. Cole was able to demonstrate that in their daily life, children displayed the normal level of ability in all those base-level cognitive skills which we associate with facility for mathematics, and yet the children just did not seem to get it when mathematics was presented to them in the context of formal schooling.

Even though children left school with no significant skill in mathematics, schooling did have an impact on their thinking. Another study showed that exposure to the kind of relationships and interactions characteristic of schools and other institutions in Western bureaucratic societies did allow women to improve their ability in dealing with these institutions and apply this knowledge in raising their children, and it was this second generation which benefited. What this implied was that it was the location



of teaching within the context of the highly structured and formalized system of schooling which made incomprehensible the same content which was transparent to the children when it appeared in day-to-day activities in their own lives.

Clearly then, Vygotsky's 'joint artifact-mediated action' did not contain all that was essential in human consciousness and behavior. The context was an essential element of the microcosm of activity, and if actions and/or artifacts are taken out of their social context and dropped into an alien context, they do not make sense and are incomprehensible to people trying to appropriate them.

In his research efforts to resolve this problem, Cole took up Vygotsky's belief that the researcher had to engage in a collaborative relationship with the research subject. In the case of learning, this meant, rather than 'observing' people teaching and learning, his researchers had to roll up their sleeves and try to help children learn. This was the only possible foundation for a fruitful research environment. Further than this, Cole discovered that all the progressive education initiatives which he could trace in the US had failed. The source of these failures, he diagnosed, was the inability of the initiatives to gain support, not only from teachers and pupils, but from all the parties involved in the provision and support of schooling in the community.

What this meant, in summary, was that learning could only effectively take place in the context of all the relevant people being committed to the school and its work as a shared collaborative project. This discovery was in fact not just a pragmatic observation but contains the essential philosophical insight which is implicated in the original problem of the sources of motivation, or to put in Cole's terms, in the context of learning.

The problem is that 'context' is an *open-ended totality*. How do we conceive of this totality? Cole has a diagram (credited to Bronfenbrenner) in his book (1996: 133) showing the learner in the center of a series of concentric rings: lesson, classroom organization, school organization, community organization, in order to represent an approach to analyzing this totality as 'that which surrounds'. But this is a description which seems only to represent the infinite regress posed in trying to solve this problem. Cole also includes an approach to context as 'that which weaves together' which is perhaps a richer and more fruitful metaphor for context. Cole has investigated a number of writers in search of a way of conceiving of the act-in-context. But none of these metaphors and visual images gave us concepts of the act in its context, or allowed us to conceive of a definite unity of the two in one and the same concept, rather than the act on one hand added to the context on the other.

Vygotsky came up against the same problem in child development. How to represent the 'context' into which a child grows up. Of course, in order to fully understand even a single grain of sand it is ultimately necessary to understand the entire universe. But this is not the point, is it? How can we represent the child in its social situation as a concept or unit through which we can theorize their development? Vygotsky theorized

this social situation in a concept which captured the relation between their needs and the means of their satisfaction in the form of a definite concept: a predicament. We need something similar for cross-cultural learning. In fact, we need a concept through which we can represent the intelligibility of actions in which mediating culture cannot be taken for granted. Leontyev had a point when he talked of the goals of an individual's action being the personal meaning of a societal object. This insight needs to be retained. In theorizing a person's motivation, the teleology of action, we theorize at the same time their cognition. We tend not to understand something in which we have no interest. So the learning process is inextricably bound up with motivation, and cross-cultural learning entails people sharing aims in an appropriate way.

The concepts proposed to resolve these problems are 'collaboration' and 'project'. These mutually constituting concepts represent individual actions within on-going societal processes and the motivations underlying people's actions and relationships.

'Project' is a concept which is sometimes preferred by Hegel scholars to represent 'formations of consciousness'. A project can be a single thread in the fabric of society, and does not have the connotation of being an entire 'social formation'. It is somewhat similar to the notion of 'community of practice', but rather than suggesting a closed system of self-reproducing actions, 'project' carries connotations of projecting itself forward to some ideal – a different concept of object than Leontyev's needs. It also implies that the individual and their acts are saturated with the ideal towards which the project is directed. But consistent with the conceptions of both Marx and Hegel, the ideal is not an objectively valid, better world waiting to be realized, but rather is immanent in the activity itself, and is ultimately objectified in a residue which becomes an integral part of the life of the whole. A project is inclusive of all the cultural artifacts which mediate its activity, and is sustained by definite forms of collaboration.

Collaboration is a rich concept which expresses the jointness of actions, but in collaboration the action is always conceived of as directed towards a shared end. There is a normative concept of collaboration which implies cooperation towards the common end, combined with conflict over the means of attaining the end, with cooperation and conflict sustaining one another and merging. Another important distinction is that although collaboration is a normative concept, it contains within it a range of limiting modes of collaboration, namely, division of labor, mutual instrumentation through exchange, and hierarchical command. Different modes of collaboration are also differentiated by attribution. All these different modes of collaboration have significant psychological implications precisely because collaboration is a normative concept, and people have expectations: about being consulted, about sharing objectives, about solidarity, about privacy, and so forth, which means that deviations from the norm, and from expectations, will have a psychological impact.

The suggestion is that instead of looking at the classroom or the market place as different contexts in which measurement skills are mobilized, or looking at the

classroom and the school ecologically, as an environment, we could look at the relevant projects. If a teacher relocated themselves into the market place, but still spoke to the children in the manner of a school teacher, we would not expect much progress. The point is: what project does the child see the actions as part of? The child has to figure this out to make sense of the actions and mobilize its own intellect to carry out the actions required of them. There is in fact a style of schooling in which children choose a project, usually a relatively complex and protracted project in which the child already has an interest, and then the teacher helps them complete the project and in one or another way, works the curriculum material the child will need to know for adult life, into solving the problems that arise in the course of the project.

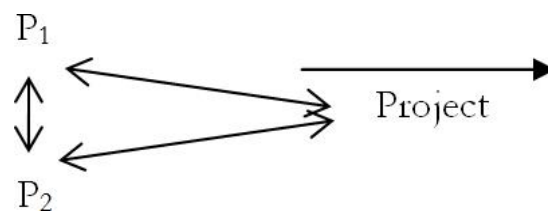
But Cole identified deeper problems. It is not enough that the child has to integrate the learning material into a meaningful project for themselves, this has also to be a meaningful project for the teacher, the school and the supporting institutions. So this remains a difficult social problem to be resolved, but perhaps the concept of project can be of use here. This concept of project is not just suggested as a cover for promoting a specific style of pedagogy. These concepts are meant in the first instance as a means of conceptualizing the place of individual actions in wider social life.

One of the aims of this work was to open up the potential for activity as an interdisciplinary concept, which could facilitate the representation of societal entities, as well as individual behavior and interactions. We have called on the concept of hermeneutic circle to indicate the specific type of problem which can be illuminated by this concept of activity. In the hermeneutic circle, an action is meaningful only in relation to the project it is furthering, whilst the project is comprehensible only through the actions of which it is composed. So the aim of the project is immanent in the actions, rather than in some imagined future state of affairs. This was Marx's conception of communism: "Communism is for us not a *state of affairs* which is to be established, an *ideal* to which reality [will] have to adjust itself. We call communism the *real* movement which abolishes the present state of things. The conditions of this movement result from the premises now in existence" (1975i: 49). This is how all projects need to be understood; this is how Marx understood activity.

The functional method in sociology rests on the idea that every institution in society has some regulatory function: "What is the state for? It is for maintaining law and order. What is marriage for? It is for raising children," etc., etc. Ultimately, this method is not scientific, but is nonetheless an example of how teleology is used in social science. Teleology also arises in nature: creatures strive to stay alive and questions like "Why does a peacock have such colorful feathers?" are meaningful questions that can be answered functionally on the presumption that natural selection takes care of the underlying mechanism. The question is: in what sense can we talk of the teleology in projects, and how do they give motivation to people in their actions, or is it the other way around, that projects are purpose-driven because the actions of which they are a part are purposive? There is no simple answer to these questions; projects do work

towards ends and people do strive for something. Individual ends are certainly derived and fulfilled in social life, and institutional ends exist only insofar as they are pursued by individual people. But the notion of project gives us a tool with which to interrogate people and their associations and look for their meaning, just as people seek meaning in the same way. 'Project' is a suitable unit for the study of sociological problems, especially where what is at issue is the very constitution of social entities (rather than being limited to interactions between existing societal entities) and the ability of institutions to mobilize people (rather than just taking people as given members of a collective).

The rich content of the notion of collaboration also brings to light more complex relationships. The notions of hierarchy, command, division of labor, cooperation, exchange, service, attribution, exploitation, dependence, solidarity, and more can all be studied in the context of just two individuals working together in a common project. And yet almost all the mysteries of social science as well as a good part of psychology are contained in this archetypal unit: two people working together in a common project.



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